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SEN. HELMS AMERICANIZES FOGGY BOTTOM

By Helen Dewar October 1, 1987

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When is the State Department a "foreign diplomatic mission?"

Not again soon, if the Senate has its way.

During Senate debate on its defense bill Tuesday night, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) took the floor to protest the department's move two weeks ago to declare itself a foreign mission in order to block a demonstration in front of the building during a visit by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

Helms cited a Sept. 11 memorandum from Louis Schwartz Jr., deputy assistant secretary for diplomatic security, advising the Secret Service that the main State Department building in Foggy Bottom would be designated a foreign diplomatic mission during a planned visit by Shevardnadze Sept. 15.

Once the move was made, Helms said, police were able to enforce a law preventing demonstrations within 500 feet of foreign diplomatic missions and thwart a planned protest against Soviet human rights abuses, which was to have included several members of Congress.

To the conservative Helms, who has had a running feud with the

State Department as ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the department's action was tantamount to waving -- or raising -- a red flag.

"There are many who have suspected, jesting or otherwise, that the State Department has been acting like a Soviet mission for years," he said. "But this time it was not outraged critics of the State Department or our foreign policy making the declaration; it was the U.S. government itself that declared the U.S. State Department as a foreign mission in honor of Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze."

On another point that appeared more compelling to other senators, Helms contended that the action violated constitutional rights of protesters. It is "mandatory that Congress take action to protect the Bill of Rights against anybody in the State Department who would seek to spare any guests the embarrassment of observing democracy in action in the United States," said Helms.

With little additional comment from his colleagues, Helms won overwhelming Senate approval of an amendment to the defense bill that condemned the State Department's action and sought to prohibit it from ever again declaring itself to be a foreign diplomatic mission. The vote was 90 to 7, with Sens. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.), Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.), Ernest F. Hollings (D-S.C.), J. Bennett Johnston (D-La.), Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), Howard M. Metzenbaum (D-Ohio) and Harry Reid (D-Nev.) in dissent.

State Department spokeswoman Phyllis Oakley, informed of the Senate vote, said the department declared itself a foreign mission "to facilitate {solutions to} the problems created for security for the metropolitan police force" during the meetings with Shevardnadze.

"This is something that has been done before" when demonstrators were expected outside State during important meetings, she said.

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